

ROMANCE AND REALISM.

TWO OF MR. HAGGARD'S NOVELS.
JESS: A Novel By H. RIDER HAGGARD. Harper & Brothers.

THE WITCH'S HEAD. By the same. D. Appleton & Co.

Mr. Haggard continues to keep out of the beaten track and to write stories which are full of imagination, description, stirring action and romance. His last novel, "Jess," is a Transvaal tale, and all the more interesting because it makes us acquainted with a people whose savagery and whose robust powers have together made them the predominant force in South Africa. The Boers, with their narrow, fervid Biblicalism, their pitiless cruelty to the native tribes, their rough and filthy habits, their dense ignorance in many respects, their indomitable pluck and selfless shrewdness, are a folk by no means admirable, by no means attractive, but who command serious attention by their force and compel a certain respect by their barbarous successes. Whether it is possible for an Englishman who has lived in the Transvaal to do them justice may perhaps be doubted. They must have always been a people "gay ill to live wth." As Carlyle's mother remarked of the philosopher, and when they conquered a peace honorable only for themselves and little less than disgraceful for Great Britain, it could hardly be expected that a representative of the discredited side should describe them from the point of view of their best qualities.

Certainly Mr. Haggard has drawn an unprepossessing picture of them, but it is a thoroughly interesting one, and perhaps to make amends for any partiality in this respect he has taken for his principal villain a half-breed in whose veins flows not less English than Boer blood. There is not much plot. An English farm in the Transvaal is the scene of most of the action. "Jess," the heroine, is a peculiar girl of strong passions but stronger will. She idolizes her younger sister, and finding that the latter is in love with Captain Niel, the hero, she resolves to sacrifice her own affections, which are placed on the same object. Frank Muller, the half-breed Boer, is a remarkable character. His heart is fixed upon having Bessie, the sister of Jess, to wife. He is unscrupulous, fierce and treacherous. Being a man of strong intellect he has acquired an ascendancy over the Boer population, and intends to use it to make himself President of the Republic. In attempting to secure the hand of Bessie he resorts to various underhand devices, and does not shrink from assassination when the opportunity arises. Under other circumstances he would be a melodramatic villain but in the Transvaal, among a race of semi-barbarians, and subject to all the exciting influences of a life-and-death struggle with England, his excesses do not appear so unnatural nor are they out of place. The action is spirited throughout. At the very opening there is a lively sketch of the armedager at Pretoria, and some apparently faithful portraits of Boer chiefs, generals and families. An amusing one is that of the old matrarch, who insists that there are precisely three thousand men in the British army, and holds to this belief with a pertinacity worthy of more accurate statistics.

Episodes in the story stand out as almost perfect bits of graphic narrative; as for instance that of the attempt to murder Jess and Niel at the false ford, the scene of the arrest of Silas Croft, the burning of Moofontein and the vengeance of poor Jess. The vivid descriptive power shown in Mr. Haggard's previous works is seen at its best here, and the passion and energy of the narrative carry the reader away. There is one person concerning whom different views may be entertained, and that is Bessie. She is beautiful and sweet, but she has little mind and not much strength of any kind. Though Jess is devoted to her she responds coldly to sisterly love, and when she is made to believe by a false report that Niel is dead she rallies so quickly from the shock that it is plain to see she is not far from heart-wth. Jess is of course intended to show the more nobly by contrast with this weak nature, but Captain Niel will be apt to lose ground in the good opinion of the reader when it is seen how he conceals himself for the loss of so rich and deep a love as the unfortunate heroine found impossible to withhold from him. The story, however, is a decidedly captivating one and not to be put down until the end is reached; a sure proof of the sterling quality of any novel.

In "The Witch's Head" Mr. Haggard lays his scene partly in England and partly in South Africa. The title is in truth rather far-fetched, and savors of the sensational overmuch. There really is a witch's head in the story—the embalmed head of some Saxon beauty, discovered strangely through the washing down by the sea of an ancient churchyard. There is some evidence, too, that the author at one time intended this ghostly relic to play a more dominant part in the story, but he appears to have abandoned that purpose, and has contented himself by dimly suggesting an analogy or connection of an occult character between the wicked modern girl, Florence, and the wicked ancient witch whose head is introduced. So vaguely is this thought outlined, however, and so little is it subsequently developed, that it counts for nothing in the story, and beyond a general indication of ill-luck following the witch's head, there is no justification for the employment of so bizarre a conception. Apart from this the story is in no way open to the charge of unreality. In none of his tales has Mr. Haggard surpassed several of the episodes here. The description of the combat between the Boer giant and Jeremy, and that of the last fight of Alston's Horse are good enough of themselves to make a reputation. For spirit, terseness, intensity and graphic force these pictures are admirable, and deserve to stand with the best work of the kind in fiction. Mr. Haggard seems to have a penchant for soft-charactered young women, it must be said, for Eva in "The Witch's Head" resembles Bessie in "Jess" in several particulars, and her moral flabbiness and tendency to yield to the last come is not only aggravating but repellent. Still she strongly presented and the type is faithfully portrayed.

There is a sort of poetical justice in delivering so faithless a sweetheart over to that odious Plowden, though Eva's moral invertebracy enables her to adapt herself to even this position, and the impression is conveyed, despite her final outbreak of sentimentality, that she was tolerably contented with her lot.

Mr. Haggard, it is true, defends the feeble girl and argues that she is not to be despised because she fails to exhibit a strength of which man has for ages done his best to deprive her sex. In all that time, he urges, the duty of obedience has been drilled into her until it is no wonder if sometimes she loses sight of her paramount obligations to truth and right and yields to the insistence of those whose authority she has been taught to accept. The plot is valid in ethics, but notwithstanding it is human nature to feel indignant at Ernest's jilting and to regard the fickle, faithless maiden with disapprobation.

There is a more elaborate plot in "The Witch's Head" than in "Jess," and the character drawing is often good and strong. The author evidently has studied the native African tribes with care, and his Hottentots and Zulus are lifelike and full of oddities which presuppose real models. There is a Hottentot in "Jess" who is probably a portrait, and the Zulu Maxx in "The Witch's Head" is another obvious study from life. The character of Florence is a rather dubious one. It is a question whether a real woman, unless much more depraved than Florence, has any right to be, considering her antecedents, would, even under the influence of jealousy, so cruelly and coolly betray her own sister. Florence, after all, is supposed to have been a lady, yet in much of her conduct, even in her speech at times, there is a coarseness so near akin to brutality that one is puzzled to account for it. It is not natural in her social position to be conceived of as alloying herself with so vulgar a boor as Plowden, nor can a woman possessing the least delicacy of mind, such as even intercourse with refined people must foster more or less, be thought of as entering deliberately and without apparent shrinking into an

shameful a plot. This part of the story, in short, is rather false; but it must be remembered that if Mr. Haggard has failed in describing a woman it is only what—if we are to believe many authoritative representatives of the sex—the tyrant may has been doing steadily ever since he began to write fiction. For the rest the story has plenty of swing and "go." There is abundance of incident, some sound philosophy, though that is never obtruded, and evidence on every page that the author is a born observer and gifted with the twin faculty of graphic description. What he sees, that he sets down, and does it with spirit and interest, the injection of which enlivens scenes makes the main difference between the two kinds of realism which divide the critics today; the realism namely which is description to death as butchers bleed calves, and served up in the interesting naughtiness of veal; and that which is put before the world rudely, active, full of life and energy, because instead of phlebotomizing the facts the reporter has intensified their vitality by transferring his own surplus life into their veins.

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